

THE FACILITATOR'S BOOK OF QUESTIONS

Tools for Looking Together
at Student and Teacher Work

David Allen
Tina Blythe

Foreword by Gene Thompson-Grove



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Introduction

Most of us know the sheer pleasure of watching a basketball team or listening to a jazz band that is really working well together. Both situations involve a dynamic mix of roles, exchanges of information (not to mention of the ball), a balance between rules and structures (chords and set plays), and more improvised, opportunistic—even inspired—play. And often one player—perhaps the bandleader or the point guard (but possibly a hardworking forward or deft bassist)—performs in a way that makes the work of the others look and sound better. In short, a satisfying and effective collaboration unfolds before our eyes and ears.

While teachers' collaborative work is almost never as public as a jazz band's is or competitive in the way a basketball team's is, the idea of collaboration is increasingly central to the work of schools, for the adults in the building as well as the students. In a field notorious for the isolation of its practitioners, collegial collaboration within schools has made some great strides in recent years—although few would deny there is room for much more progress.

At the heart of most teacher collaboration is a conversation, or better, an ongoing series of conversations. Of course, conversations among teachers are not unusual. Think of the faculty room or staff meetings. But the conversations we focus on in this book are different. Unlike either informal faculty room conversations that tend to move naturally and quickly from topic to topic, or typical staff meetings that serve mainly to transmit information (begging the question, “Couldn't we have got that in a memo or e-mail?”), the conversations discussed in this book are opportunities for colleagues to reflect together on key questions about their practice and their students' learning (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Lieberman & Miller, 2000; Louis, Kruse, & Marks, 1996).

These conversations may happen within established groups such as a department or a grade-level team; however, they just

as often take place within groups that assemble specifically to engage in exploration of or inquiry into the mysteries of teaching and learning. These groups go by different names, including

- critical friends groups
- collaborative inquiry groups
- study groups
- action research groups
- “looking at student work” groups

While the names suggest some distinctive features, these groups also share some important qualities (in addition to collaboration itself):

- A grounding in the actual work that students and teachers carry out in classrooms and schools
- A recognition that all participants in the group bring expertise as well as unique experiences and perspectives
- A focus (or set of foci) determined by the group and of deep significance to the group's members
- A commitment that group members make both to their own learning and to the learning of the group as a whole

Such groups often have two other features in common: A facilitator who helps to guide the group's work; and the use of “protocols”—that is, structures—that support the focused examination and discussion of students' and/or teachers' work.

The leader of a jazz group or the point guard on a basketball team looks for ways to use the structures and constraints of the melody or the game to provoke and support the efforts of individuals and the whole group or team. For facilitators of collegial conversations, protocols provide that set of structures and constraints. In this book, we focus on the parts facilitators play so that others in the group may play (and learn) better. The remainder of this brief introduction consists of just seven questions (leaving plenty for the rest of the book).

WHY A BOOK OF QUESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS?

As educators, we share an appreciation for the importance of asking and answering questions. Yehudi Menuhin, the brilliant violinist, recounted that his father asked him every evening not what he learned in school, but, “What questions did you ask in school?” The role of questions is as crucial in supporting adult learning as it is in supporting students’ learning. Questions are the facilitator’s most important tool—really a whole set of tools, since they take many forms, with different questions appropriate for different points in protocol-guided conversations (as well as before and after them). In some protocols, questions of different kinds are built into the structure of the protocol. But many of the questions that support participants’ learning are asked by facilitators spontaneously in response to the group’s conversation as it develops.

WHY A BOOK OF QUESTIONS FOR FACILITATORS OF PROTOCOLS?

Protocols, particularly those that serve to structure conversations about student and teacher work, have gained enormous popularity in recent years. Much existing wisdom about facilitating effective meetings is applicable in facilitating protocols. Yet protocol-guided conversations have particular features that distinguish them from other kinds of meetings or professional development sessions. These distinctive features—as well as the unique challenges that emerge in conversations using protocols—call for particular kinds of facilitation. Chapter 1 provides an overview of protocols, including three commonly used protocols for looking at student work and teacher work.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY STUDENT WORK AND TEACHER WORK?

Many kinds of data are available for analyzing, assessing, and improving curriculum and instruction to support student learning

and understanding: classroom grades and test scores, standardized test scores, research studies on particular curricula or instructional strategies, and so on. All offer important opportunities for educators' learning. In this book, we focus on just two kinds of data: (1) samples of work students produce or create in the classroom (usually), most commonly in response to an assignment or a task provided by their teacher, and (2) samples of the work teachers do to support students in their learning.

These samples often take physical form: student writing, problem solving, or visual products, as well as teachers' assignments, writing prompts, scoring criteria, rubrics, and so on. The tangible form of such data makes them ideal focal points for a protocol-guided conversation. Sometimes the work is presented in narrative form, such as a teaching "dilemma" (Cuban, 2001) or "critical incident" (Tripp, 1993), often supplemented or illustrated by physical "artifacts" like those mentioned above.

The forms of student and teacher work are nearly limitless. While we offer guidance to facilitators and presenting teachers on how to select samples to address different kinds of questions, the purpose of this book is not to identify better or worse student or teacher work to present, but to help educators more profitably learn from the everyday currency of classroom teaching and learning.

The relationship between teachers' work and students' work is critical and not yet well understood. Recent studies have begun to address the influence of teachers' assignments on students' capacity to produce work that demonstrates greater understanding or in-depth learning (Newmann, Lopez, & Bryk, 1998). Protocols offer one vehicle for teachers to explore for themselves how their own work affects student learning.

WHO IS THIS BOOK FOR?

In this book, we write about the facilitator without reference to how that facilitator was chosen, what her background is, what she does when she's not facilitating, and so on. The developmental path for

facilitators is not well defined (although maybe it should be), and very few people facilitate groups as their primary job. Some facilitators are “insiders,” typically teachers or administrators who take on the responsibility of facilitating groups of peers. These are typically lead teachers or mentor teachers for whom facilitation is one aspect of their teacher leadership. Other facilitators come from outside the school, for example, a school coach from the district, a partner organization, or a local university. Facilitating protocols is often just one aspect of the coaching they provide.

Insider and outsider facilitators can both play extremely valuable roles in supporting collaboration and learning in the school—indeed, in our view and others’ (Moffett, 2000), having a combination of insider and outsider facilitators is optimal. Each brings different advantages and faces different challenges. Insiders know the school context and the people well. Because they are part of the day-to-day routine of the school, they can monitor the work’s progress closely and tailor the work to fit the needs of the school. And, of course, they have a vested interest in its success. On the other hand, it can be challenging for teachers, especially, to take on a leadership role among their peers. They also may have had limited opportunities to develop the skills that contribute to effective facilitation.

Outsiders may not have as much difficulty taking on a unique role within the group: As outsiders, their status is somewhat unique to begin with. They often bring well-practiced skills and a range of experiences from facilitating in other school settings. However, removed from the day-to-day operations of the school, they are not in a good position to keep the work alive and growing in a sustained way. That kind of work depends on the commitment and efforts of the insiders, particularly school leaders and group members.

Despite these differences, we have found that a facilitator’s skills, the questions she asks, and the actions she takes to guide a conversation do not vary dramatically depending on whether the facilitator is an insider or an outsider. In writing this book, we are drawing not only on our own facilitation experiences but also on the experiences and reflections of a range of facilitators with whom we have worked, insiders and outsiders, novice and experienced.